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ABSTRACT

A series of three field experiments, using 233 subjects in all, tested the effect of anonymity on helping. All three experiments demonstrated that identifiable subjects were significantly more likely to offer non-emergency help than were anonymous subjects. The third experiment also showed that only anonymous subjects were more likely to help a victim similar to themselves than one who was dissimilar. The results were interpreted as indicating that anonymity encourages norm violation, and therefore tends to reduce helping behavior when helping is the appropriate response. (Author)

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# Anonymity and helping: three field studies

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Abstract. Three field experiments, with 233 subjects in all, tested the effect of anonymity on helping. All three experiments demonstrated that identifiable subjects were significantly more likely to offer non-emergency help than were anonymous subjects. The third experiment also showed that only anonymous subjects were more likely to help a victim similar to themselves than one who was dissimilar. The results were interpreted as indicating that anonymity encourages norm violation.

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Despite the importance of anonymity as a notable urban characteristic (cf. Milgram, 1970), there seems to be relatively little research testing the effect of anonymity on helping behavior.

The present authors suggest that anonymity (as compared to identifiability) reduces the likelihood of most instances of helping behavior. This prediction is based upon the assumption that when one is identifiable in our society, one generally feels obliged to act in accordance with a "social responsibility norm" (Berkowitz and Daniels, 1963), both in order to live up to one's own self-image, and to fulfill the expectations of one's fellow bystandars. When one is anoymous, on the other hand, the social responsibility norm may not be salient, since one is freed both from the social pressure of one's fellow bystanders and from the reminder of one's own identity or self-image. Viewed in terms of a cost-reward analysis, anonymity may reduce the costs of not helping (i.e., social sanctions and self-blame) and thus reduce helping. This formulation is consistent with several treatments of anonymity in the psychological literature. For example, Zimbardo 1969 argues that in situations of anonymity, anti-normative behavior is released since social evaluation does not provide an impetus to correct behavior. This suggests that anonymity might discourage helping behavior. When helping is the socially approved response.

In recent laboratory studies (in which helping was the normative response, both the present authors (note 2) and Schwartz & Gotlieb (note 1) demonstrated that subjects who were indentifiable or known to the other bystanders, were more likely to help a victim in distress than were subjects who were anonymous.

Although this difference supported the prediction above, it was felt that further testing with unobtrusive measures would add credibility and generality to the finding. Accordingly, three field experiments were conducted.

Experiment 1

Independent Variable. In Experiment 1 both an anonymous and an identifiable condition were included. Briefly, identifiability was induced by smiling at a subject who was waiting for an elevator in a large New York City department store.

When one is alone in a place full of strangers such as a subway train or a large department store, presumably one feels basically anonymous, and presumably jolted by a stranger who smiles (as in this study), or asks the time, or suggests that he is in fact, an acquaintance. The present authors reasoned that such events reduce one's feeling of protective anonymity and increase the likelihood of adherence to a norm of social responsibility.

Subjects. Forty female shoppers at a large New York City department store, became subjects if they were unaccompanied and waiting for a particular elevator.

Detailed procedure. In the experimental (i.e. identifiable) condition, the female experimenter "caught the eye" of a designated subject and gave her a warm and pleasant smile. This occurred just as the elevator was about to arrive. (Since the experimenter was female, she used only female subjects in order that her smile not be misunderstood.) As the passengers, including the subject and the experimenter, boarded the elevator, a female confederate stationed herself next to the designated subject. As the elevator doors closed, the confederate (looking up at the store directory) exclaimed to no one in particular, "Damn, I've left my glasses. Can anyone tell me what

floor the umbrellas are on?" Anyone who answered was thanked cordially. If neither the subject nor anyone else answered, the experimenter modeled the appropriate behavior, and was thanked by the confederate.

In the control (ie. anonymous) situation, the procedure was identical to that outlined above, with the confederate standing next to the designated subject in the elevator. However, the experimenter neither made eye contact with nor smiled at these subjects. Conditions were counterbalanced on each trial to control for practice effects, time of day, etc.

Results. As predicted, subjects in the experimental (smile) condition offered directions significantly more often than did subjects in the control condition. $x^2$ (1) = 4.87, $p < .05$, the exact percentage being 70% of Ss helping in smile condition and 35% in the control condition.

Conclusions. While these data confirmed the prediction, an alternative explanation for the results was possible. It may have been that the smile of the experimenter was interpreted by the subjects as approval for the way they looked or were dressed. This could have led to a "good feeling," encourage helping. In an attempt to eliminate the confounding of good feeling and identifiability, a second experiment was conducted.

Experiment II

Independent Variable.

Experiment II repeated the two conditions of Experiment I (smile vs. control) and added a third (mistaken identity) condition. This third condition represented a manipulation of identifiability which seemed less likely to lead to a good feeling than would a smile.

Subjects. Twenty-four female shoppers in a different New York City department store became subjects if they were unaccompanied and waiting for a designated elevator. A new experimenter/confederate team (again both young women) conducted the experiment.

Manipulation check. Separately from the main experiment, the experimenter and confederate ran 30 additional trials (ten in each of the three conditions) in which the independent variable was manipulated, but the emergency did not occur. Instead, the confederate followed each of the subjects out of the elevator and conducted a two-question interview. Subjects were asked, first of all, if they had felt noticed while waiting for the elevator, and second, how happy they felt.

In response to this interview, every subject in the experimental conditions (smile and mistaken identity) indicated that she had felt "noticed while waiting for the elevator," while none of the control subjects reported this feeling. This supported the contention that the experimental manipulations did serve to reduce anonymity. However, in response to an 11-point graphic scale of "happiness," mean differences between the conditions did appear: control: 5.10; mistaken identity: 7.9; smile: 8.5; $F(2/27) = 22.10$, $p < .01$. Thus, it seemed that even in the mistaken-identity condition, happiness and identifiability were not entirely separate.

Detailed procedure. The control and smile conditions were conducted exactly as described for Experiment I. In the mistaken identity condition, the experimenter made eye contact with the subject, then approached the subject and asked, "Excuse me, aren't you Suzie Spear's sister?" (no one was).

Results. As predicted, the pattern of helping from least to most, was control, smile, mistaken identity. The exact percentages of subjects who helped were: control: 0%; smile: 50%; mistaken identity: 75%. The proportion of helping in the two experimental conditions was not significantly differnt

(Fisher's exact test = n.s.). Therefore, following Siegel's (1959) suggestion for the analysis of data with small expected frequencies, the two experimental conditions were combined and the difference between the combined experimental conditions and the conrol condition was tested. Subjects in the combined experimental conditions were found to be significantly more likely to help than were the control subjects, $p < .01$, Fishers exact test.

Conclusions. Experiments I and II lent support to the hypothesis that anonymous subjects are less helpful than are those who are relatively identifiable.

Experiment II

The third experiment attempted to extend the generality of the conclusion by testing it in a situation with naturally occurring differences in anonymity. Also, in line with Zimbardo's (1969) formulation of anonymity as encouraging norm violation, it was predicted here that anonymous subjects would not only help less, but would also be more likely to violate a norm. The norm in question here was one that dictated that, in a hockey game setting, home team fans are as deserving of help by home team rooters as are visiting team fans. And it was predicted that anonymous subjects might violate this norm.

Independent Variables. Two independent variables were manipulated and first - two conditions of anonymity -anonymous and identifiable- and second- two conditions of similarity between subject and victim- essentially victim as home team fan (as were the subjects) vs. victim as visiting team fan.

For the manipulation of anonymity, it was assumed that season ticket holders at a sports stadium become "familiar strangers" (Milgram, 1970) to those in seats around them soon after the season has begun. Subjectively, they may feel somewhat identifiable when sitting in their regular seats, and relatively anonymous when alone near the drink stands or rest rooms during intermission. Thus, the experiment was conducted in two locations, near the seats of season ticket holders (for the identifiable condition) and near the drink stands (for the anonymous condition).

For the similarity manipulation, it was argued that, to a subject rooting for the home team, a victim wearing a home team shirt would seem more similar than would a victim wearing a shirt of the visiting team. Therefore, in each of the two locations, the victim wore a home team or a visiting team shirt.

Manipulation check. Separately from the main experiment, twenty-five additional season ticket holders were interviewed while at the hockey stadium. These subjects were asked to indicate on 7-point graphic scales, how anonymous they felt (a) in their seats, and (b) near the escalators: and then on a separate 7-point graphic scale, to indicate whether either home team or visiting team fans should be more likely to receive help in finding a contact lens.

Results of manipulation checks. Analysis of the mean "subjective anonymity scores" revealed that subjects felt significantly more anonymous under the stands than in their season seats, $t(27)=4.22$, $p < .01$. In addition, the mean response to the question as to which victim

should be helped was 3.88, close to the mid-or equal likelihood point on the scale. Thus, the pretest data supported both the manipulation of anonymity as well as the assumption that a norm dictates that home team and visiting team people should both be helped.

Subjects. One hundred and twenty season ticket holders at Madison Square Garden in New York City became subjects if they were unaccompanied and either in their regular seats or in the corridors near the drink stands.

Procedure. The female victim, wearing either the home team or the visiting team jersey pretended to drop a contact lens either (a) near a person sitting alone in the stands; or (b) near a person standing alone and unencumbered by food or drinks in the corridor under the stands. If a subject helped, the victim "found" the lens after a brief search, thanked the subject, and confirmed in casual conversation that the subject was a season ticket holder and a home team fan. If a subject failed to help, the lens was "found" by the experimenter who uttered a loud "Found it." An observer stationed nearby noted whether a potential subject had in fact noticed the emergency. In all cases, experimental trials were conducted early in the intermission periods to minimize the possibility that subjects would fail to help because they were in a hurry. Conditions were counter-balanced during each intermission.

Results - anonymity. Overall, anonymous subjects were significantly less likely to help than were identifiable subjects, 45% vs. 73%, $X^2(1) = 8.78$, $p < .01$.

Results-similarity. As predicted, anonymous subjects did discriminate between similar and dissimilar victims, whereas identifiable subjects did not. Subjects in the anonymous conditions were more likely to help a similar victim than a dissimilar one, 70% vs. 20%, $X^2(s) = 13.20$, $p < .01$. This comparison was not significant for the identifiable conditions, the difference being 83% vs60% , $X^2(1) = 2.95$, n.s.

Conclusions - experiment III. The data supported the prediction of norm violation by anonymous subjects, as well as the previous finding that anonymous subjects are generally less helpful than are subjects who are identifiable.

General Conclusions. - This series of experiments supported the notion that anonymity leads to norm violation and to a reduction in helping behavior when helping is the appropriate response. The first two experiments in the series, while successfully supporting the hypothesis, raised the question of positive affect as an additional factor operating for individuated subjects at least in these non-threatening situations.

In any event, the results of the three experiments suggest that anonymity is a factor in the oft noted failure to receive help in urban settings. However, the ability of relatively simple manipulations (smiles or momentary conversations) to reduce this effect, at least in non-threatening situations, offers some encouragement to those who are optimistic concerning the urban condition and its effects on human relationships.

## Reference Notes

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2. Solomon, H., & Solomon, L.Z. Effects of anonymity on helping in emergency situations. Paper presented at the Eastern Psychological association annual meeting in Washington, D.C., March, 1978.

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## Footnotes

1. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, August, 1978. Requests for reprints should be addressed to the first author at: Marymount Manhattan College, 221 East 71 St., New York City, N.Y. 10021